

## ***The Canterbury Tales* AP Prompts**

1. “The true test of comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter.” —George Meredith

Choose a novel, play, or long poem in which a scene or character awakens “thoughtful laughter” in the reader. Write an essay in which you show why this laughter is “thoughtful” and how it contributes to the meaning of the work.

2. In many works of literature, a physical journey—the literal movement from one place to another—plays a central role. Choose a novel, play or epic poem in which a physical journey is an important element and discuss how to journey adds to the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

3. No portrait in *The Canterbury Tales* is without direct or indirect reference to money: a character’s attitude toward wealth is a touchstone (or test) of his/her character. Show how this statement can be true as you analyze at least one pilgrim from each estate, illustrating how Chaucer uses both direct and indirect characterization.

4. Imagine that you are on the committee who decides the “Who’s Who” or “Senior Superlatives” section of *The Canterbury Tales Yearbook*. Choose four of the pilgrims and decide what superlative you would award each one and why. You can use the standard categories (e.g., “most likely to succeed”) or make up your own. Justify your decisions by specific reference to the text.

5. We have come to expect, of “good” literature, that the characters in it should be unique. Some fine authors, however, have made very effective use of stereotypical characters in their work.

Write about one piece of literature in which either the uniqueness of the characters or the fact that they are “typical” is important to the success of the whole work.

6. “Nothing can happen nowhere. The locale of the happening always colours the happening, and often, to a degree, shapes it.” --Elizabeth Bowen

Discuss the setting of a novel, play or epic poem. Show how the setting helps us to understand what happens in the story, and identify ways in which what happens is affected by where it happens.

7. “I should like it put on record that I never took the smallest pains with my style, have never thought about it, and do not know or want to know whether it is a style at all or

whether it is not, as I believe and hope, just common simple straightforwardness. I cannot conceive how any man can take thought for his style without loss to himself and his readers.” --Samuel Butler, 19th Century satirist

Discuss the style of a novel, play, or epic poem you have studied in the light of the above comment. What signs are there that the writer has ‘taken thought for his [her] style’? Has that resulted in benefit, or loss, to the reader?

8. In what we may call “primitive” literature, characters can be easily identified as either “good” or “bad.” More sophisticated literature, however, starts from the knowledge that human nature exists only in shades of grey, and proceeds in the belief that we should not make any quick, nor perhaps any final, judgment of how people behave.

How clearly, in a novel, play or epic poem you have studied, can we identify characters’ “goodness” or “badness”? Does the author communicate a judgment, final or otherwise, of their behavior? What can you gather, from any judgment made, about the writer’s own value system?

9. Explicate the following e e cummings sonnet about *The Canterbury Tales*. How accurately does it reflect the spirit of Chaucer’s work? (Note: E.E. Cummings disregarded the "normal" rules of capitalization and punctuation in his poetry--have fun!)

honor corruption villainy holiness  
riding in fragrance of sunlight (side by side  
all in a singing wonder of blossoming yes  
riding) to him who died that death should be dead

humblest and proudest eagerly wandering  
(equally all alive in miraculous day)  
merrily moving thorough sweet forgiveness of spring  
(over the under the gift of the earth of the sky

knight and ploughman pardoner wife and nun  
merchant frere clerk somnour miller and reve  
and geoffrey and all) come up from the never of when  
come into the now of forever come riding alive

down while crylessly drifting through vast most  
nothing's own nothing children go of dust

**10.** Explicate the following Longfellow poem about Chaucer. How accurately does it reflect the spirit of Chaucer's work?

### **CHAUCER**

An old man in a lodge within a park;  
The chamber walls depicted all around  
With portraitures of huntsman, hawk, and hound,  
And the hurt deer. He listeneth to the lark,

Whose song comes with the sunshine through the dark  
Of painted glass in leaden lattice bound;  
He listeneth and he laugheth at the sound,  
Then writeth in a book like any clerk.

He is the poet of the dawn, who wrote  
*The Canterbury Tales*, and his old age  
Made beautiful with song; and as I read

I hear the crowing cock, I hear the note  
Of lark and linnet, and from every page  
Rise odors of ploughed field or flowery mead.

*--Longfellow.*